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It Doesn't Look Like Church to Me!

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Wherever we turn these days, it seems that we hear about new forms of church: emerging churches, missional churches, house churches, organic churches, new monastics. Often they are small in number, with practices and language unfamiliar to us, and some Christians find it hard to even recognize these communities as church.

In this article, I address three questions many Christians have about these new churches. First, why is this an important subject for us to consider, regardless of our personal interest in these emerging communities? Second, what do we mean by *new church*? Finally, what implications can we as individuals, congregations, and participants in the Stone-Campbell heritage glean from this growing movement?

Why We Need to Give New Churches Our Attention

Demographer David Olson has carefully tracked American church attendance by actual count for many years. By his calculations, roughly 15 percent of Americans are currently present at a church building in a given week, and this percentage has been trending downward for decades.[1] Doing the math on our population of 320 million people, over 270 million Americans were not in a church building this week.

This is one measure suggesting that the United States in our time is among the great mission fields of the world. It may be that only China and India have more people without an active faith in Jesus. In any case, a vast mosaic of people and groups across our cities and our nation are not being reached by current churches. We need new churches of many kinds to bring the good news to these multitudes.

At the same time, it is vital for those of us in established churches to be aware of how much these new initiatives need us. After twenty-five years of training and working with new church-planting initiatives around the world and especially in the United States, I know firsthand how important it is for these frontline kingdom workers to have strong, steady encouragement and support from us. Without that support, experience makes clear that many of them will not last long. Like any young life in a hostile environment, they need strong support and protection in their early years as they become established.

A second reason for giving the new churches our careful attention is the insight they offer us in facing the unprecedented change underway in our time. This change likely has a key role in the declining church attendance that Olson reports. I refer here to a discontinuous change. In this arena, things are unlike they have ever been before, and to face this extraordinary challenge, Christians must be prepared to adapt. One way to describe this broad change is the shift from a *walkable* world to a *virtual* world.

I recently spoke with the Schochoh Church of Christ in Logan County, Kentucky. One mile from their lovely old church building is the log meeting house where the Red River Revival took place in 1800. What Barton Stone witnessed there led to a similar but larger revival at Cane Ridge that helped launch what we now know as the Stone side of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

1. See David Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

If I had spoken with the Schochoh congregation when their building was new 115 years ago, one thing I would have known was that the people in that congregation were living in a walkable world. A walkable world is a world in which nearly everyone you see is known to you, often for your whole life. The people with whom you work, shop, attend school, play, and meet at church are familiar faces with whom your life has overlapped frequently and in many ways.

In the walkable world of 1900, whether you were among the 10 percent who lived in cities or the 90 percent who did not, in all likelihood you shared three meals a day with your extended family. If your work was outside the home, for the midday meal you usually walked in from the fields or elsewhere. At that time, and for most times and places before it, *thick community*—with all its beauty and challenges—was the unremarkable norm for how people lived.[2]

Last year though, even speaking to this small country congregation, I knew that the world my hearers inhabit is fundamentally different—not a walkable world, but a virtual world. In a virtual world, relatively few people are embedded in relationships where they are well-known. In the course of a typical life, relational time is thinly spread across many acquaintances. In a virtual world, one has to be uncommonly intentional to form and keep deep relationships.

What happened to change our worlds? Many factors contributed to this change over several generations. For example, early in the last century Henry Ford saw the opportunity to make a new form of transportation widely available: the horseless carriage. Soon automobiles became affordable and then ubiquitous. A few decades later, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and others realized that the new speed, freedom and comfort with which we could travel opened the possibility of people living with more room, farther from the crowded urban centers. By the mid-1900s, the American "sub-urb" had become a new norm.

Shortly into this experiment some of the architects realized that this change was redefining our culture—and not all for the better. A new more private, less relational culture was emerging. More driving meant more relationships spread over larger areas. People found themselves working, shopping, going to school, and often attending church among people they knew barely or not at all.

At the same time, the telephone, radio, and then television became fixtures in American homes. When I was a little boy, we did not have a television, but by the early 60s we—and most of our neighbors—had a black-and-white TV. Suddenly, from the comfort of our own homes, we could be immersed in another world with the click of a button. And in the years to come more and more of our attention would be given to that virtual world.

Air conditioners and attached garages gave us less reason to be outside, more reason not to see our neighbors. Then, by the 1980s, personal computers were providing new, more powerful windows into the wider world from our own private space. Since then the Internet, the World Wide Web, mobile computing, and now wearable computing have opened the virtual world to us at a breathlessly accelerating pace.

One outcome of all this is that average Americans today, whether teens or adults, spend seventy-two hours per week—twelve hours per day—in front of a virtual screen. And even when we are away from screen time, our activities, whether at work or the mall, offer little opportunity to nurture relationships. With so much of our attention consumed in virtual activity, many of the core practices that support thick community are simply beyond our reach. And in ways we often cannot fully describe, we feel that loss: the thinness of our world and relationships, a longing to know and be deeply known that commonly seems to elude us.

This shift—from a walkable world to a virtual world, from thick to thin community—profoundly shapes what constitutes good news in our time. The truth is that we are often still practicing church as though the thick relationships of a walkable world can be assumed. But we live in a virtual world, where one has to be uncommonly intentional to form and keep deep relationships.

All of this raises a vital question Christians must face in our time: What would it take to *be* the family that Jesus modeled and called his disciples into? How could we imagine a thicker community life from where we live in a virtual world? Or as James K. A. Smith puts it, what *liturgies*—rituals of ultimate concern—would be powerful enough to capture and hold our attention?[3]

2. *Thick community* refers here to groups that share many resources, as will be described in more detail below.

3. Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 86.

This question points to a third reason I believe all American Christians need to give attention to the new churches. They seem to reveal ways God is inviting us to reconsider how the deep rituals, the rhythms of our attention, can address the challenges of a virtual world.

One way to describe God's initiative during this time is through the lens of grace. As a teenager growing up among churches of Christ, I remember noticing a definite increase in how much I was hearing about grace. The great principle stated in Ephesians 2 that had been such a mark of the Reformation seemed to be coming from many voices: "For it is by grace you are saved, through trust—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2.8–9).

This notion that salvation is an unearned gift came as good news to many of us in the 1960s and 70s. As that idea settled in and began to shape the way we saw life, for some the question surfaced, "If we live in a *state* of grace, shouldn't we expect to experience more of God's presence now?" At first many of these people looked for a more vibrant experience of God's life in our assemblies. Renewal in public worship and exploration of how we might bring greater beauty and creativity to our meetings had our attention.

Over time, and as the thinning of American community became more deeply felt, other, broader questions about grace began to surface for some Christians: "If we live in a state of grace, how could our whole *way of life* reflect that reality more deeply? If we are not only saved *by* grace, but also *for* grace how then shall we live?"

For those asking these questions, it became clear that our reading of Ephesians must move beyond 2.9: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2.10). "To each one of us a grace has been given as Christ distributed it" (Eph 4.7). What if normal Christian life is meant to be lived in an *ecosystem* of grace—a new family wherein each of us is gifted to bear God's life in and for the world?[4]

This question brings us to a fourth reason I believe all Christians in our attention-deficit culture need to be studying the new churches: they bear a remarkable resemblance to what God has done before in reclaiming the attention of distracted, broken people. It turns out that the new churches are not really new.

Consider a couple of examples. The ancient Mediterranean world was a world of households. Everyone was a part of these extended families, whether rich or poor, Roman or Jew. Those without a household were in deep trouble, because the household formed the basis for economic and social wellbeing. This household, or *oikos*, provided the livelihood wherein people found work in the family business—fishing, farming, or making bread. In this community was security in retirement, the location of social standing, and the group with whom daily meals were shared.

When Jesus called the first disciples, it was into a new family—partly because he knew that many who followed him would, as a result, lose their natural families. When a person made it known to their biological household, whether Jewish or Gentile, that they had decided to follow Jesus, the reaction was often the same: "You have denied the true religion, you have dishonored our family, you have endangered our business—you are no longer a part of this family."

Knowing this, Jesus said, "And all who have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or farms because of my name will receive one hundred times more and will inherit eternal life" (Matt 19.29). These new, vibrant families of Jesus, these small ecosystems of God's grace, were tangible good news in the Mediterranean neighborhoods of the first three centuries. And ultimately they permeated every corner of the Roman Empire. As New Testament scholar J. H. Elliott observes, "Households thus constituted the focus, locus and nucleus of the ministry and mission of the Christian movement."[5]

The Christian Celts in the fifth to eighth centuries re-evangelized much of Europe after the barbarian hoards had swept away Roman power. They often accomplished this work by setting up small Christian communities demonstrating the good news of a tangibly different way of life following a tangibly different god to their pagan neighbors.

Similar examples of God working through new families of Jesus to reach distracted, broken people can be discovered across history. In our time we too face the increasingly broken, distracted, and neo-pagan peoples of Western culture. We can expect that once again the liturgy, the rhythms of attention that will be strong enough to capture and hold our attention, will be a new *way of life* embodied in new families of Jesus.

4. For further development of this idea, see Kent Smith, "Economy of Grace: An Early Christian Take on Vulnerable Mission," *Missio Dei* 4, no.1 (2013).

5. Elliot, J. H., *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 188.

What We Mean By New Churches

So what are these new spiritual families like? Many descriptions of the various kinds of emerging communities exist, whether emerging, simple, missional, house, organic, new parish, or new monastics.[6] But one common factor seems especially significant for all these expressions: they are uncommonly intentional.

In 2013 two ACU colleagues and I conducted research on eleven intentional communities across North America.[7] Over the course of three months we conducted dozens of interviews exploring the dynamics of thick community. In the process we developed the following working definition of intentional Christian community: "A group that practices an uncommon sharing of assets in order to follow Jesus together."

"An uncommon sharing of assets" was key in our analysis. It became clear that the love that characterizes these communities is a tangible love. It involves sharing—and this sharing is across a whole range of gifts or assets that individuals and communities possess.

As the study continued it also became clear that across this spectrum of assets all Christian communities make decisions, either intentionally or unintentionally, about the degree to which they share each asset. By paying attention to this reality, every Christian community can map where they currently are with respect to the *thickness* of their sharing. For those who so choose, with this insight they can also make intentional decisions to change the ways they share their gifts.

Together the seven assets we identified form a typology by which communities can take inventory along a spectrum from thick to thin. A question about each asset provides a starting point from which to explore that asset:

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Purpose—*How would you describe your community's purpose?* In communities with a strong, thickly shared purpose, people across the community could describe why they were where they were and doing what they were doing. They might say, "We are living in this neighborhood of San Francisco to *be* the family of Jesus among and for our neighbors."

People—*How do you identify and engage community members' unique gifts?* Whether a person is nine or eighty-nine, male or female, regardless of ethnicity or wealth, intentional communities proactively seek to understand and call out the gift that each member brings. In an ecosystem of grace, every gift is honored; every voice is carefully heard.

Place—*How does location influence the community?* In times past people from our heritage have sometimes stated, "I love that wherever I go in this fellowship things are always the same." Through my travels I can attest that often this has been true. At the same time, communities that are attending carefully to the gift of their place often reflect the distinctives of that culture and setting in ways that are profoundly unique and effective in their context. Should we expect suburban and urban, African and Asian churches to be culturally the same?

Production—*What is the community's approach to shared and individual work?* In every healthy family there is work to be done. Intentional communities are proactive in seeing that each member has meaningful work that contributes to their shared life and purpose.

Process—*How are community decisions made and implemented?* Families wherein Jesus is Lord discover ways to discern a path forward together in each situation. Beyond authoritarianism or majority rule, healthy intentional communities work out a means to discern and govern that takes seriously God's present guidance.

Preparation—*How do newcomers become community members?* Research and personal experience make it clear to me that unless communities are intentional and clear in the ways they include new people into their ongoing practices as a family, people are unlikely to stay over time. This is true of people growing up within the community, as well as newcomers just arriving.

Possessions—*How are material goods shared?* What was true in the first century remains true today—people who love one another as family find ways to share what they have with each other "so that there is no needy among them." This is true whether the asset in question is money, cars, homes, or fields.

6. See, for example, David Janzen, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2013), 40.

7. Dr. Monty Lynn of the College of Business, and Brandon Young, architect and design professor at ACU, were my co-researchers in this study. You can access some of the findings of our study at modelingintentionalcommunity.org.

Implications

If it is true that we are living in one of the great mission fields of the world in our time, and that we face an unprecedented set of challenges in the move from a walkable to a virtual world; if it is true that as our community has been thinning, God has been working among us to thicken our liturgical imagination, to reconsider an *ecosystem of grace* as a way of life; and if all this turns out not to be something new, but rather something God has been doing since Jesus first called out his new family, then what are some implications we can draw?

First, I would recommend taking initiative to connect with and encourage someone who is exploring thicker community. It is hard to overstate how challenging it can be to pursue a way of life on mission with God that creates the space for thicker relationships. Nearly everything in our culture works against such community. These pioneers deeply need friendship and encouragement from the wider body of Christ.

Second, look for and create opportunities in your congregation to learn from these frontline kingdom workers. Every Christian community will have assets that can be shared more deeply. Invite thoughtful leaders from the new churches to be a resource that can join you in exploring ways to move toward thicker, deeper engagement with one another and the mission of God in your setting.

Finally, consider whether the Lord would have you partner with and support a new church initiative nearby or elsewhere. We in the Stone-Campbell heritage have a rich legacy of resources that we have received through the courage and sacrifice of missional leaders before us. If we would see that legacy passed on to future generations, now is the time to partner with and support the coming churches.

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